Overcoming Knowledge Barriers With Communities of Practice

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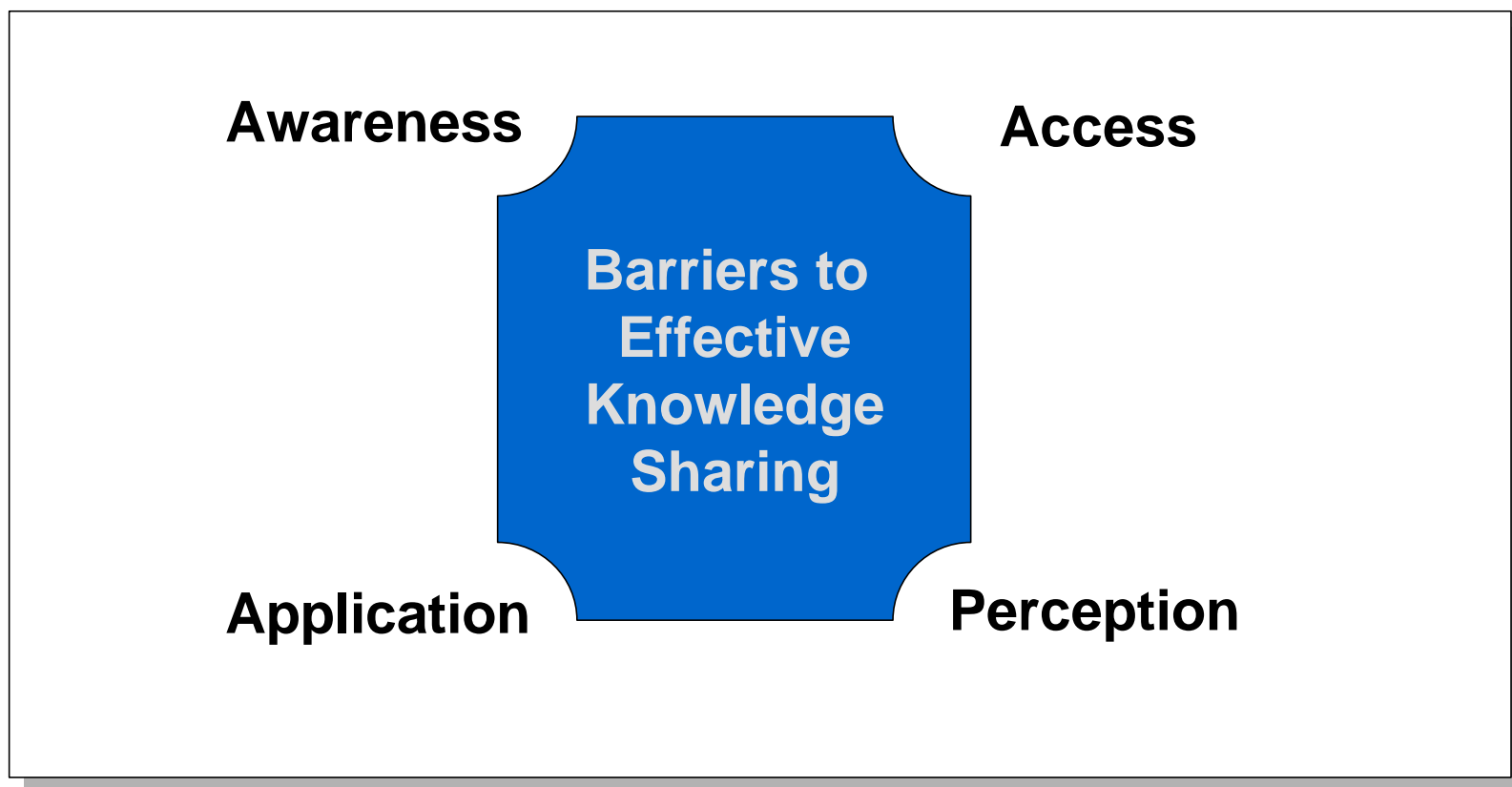
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IBM

At the individual level, knowledge seekers and knowledge sources tend to encounter similar problems around four key topics

Awareness

Access

Barriers to Effective Knowledge Sharing

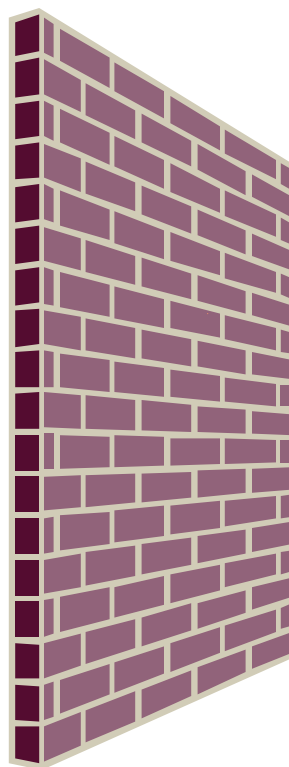**Application**

Perception

In many large, disperse organizations, individuals struggle to find others with knowledge and similar interests

Awareness

How do I find out who knows something about this?

How do I find out who might be interested in this?
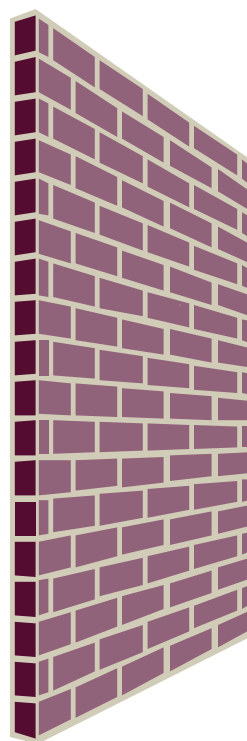
Knowledge Seeker

Knowledge Source

Access to individuals, either for specific information or problem reformulation, is often difficult in a time-constrained world

Access

How do I get this person to return my call?

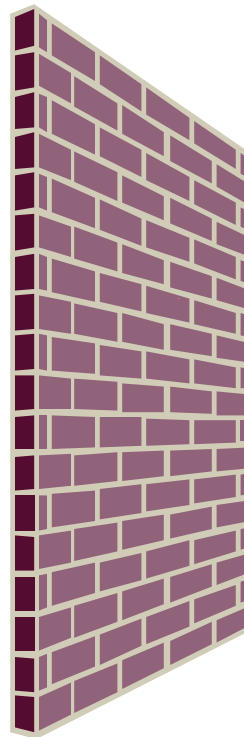*How do I get all these people to stop calling me?*

Knowledge Seeker

Knowledge Source

Applying knowledge from one situation to another can be difficult when knowledge seekers and sources have different sets of experiences

Application

How can I apply
this knowledge to
solve my problem?

How do I make sure
my knowledge isn't
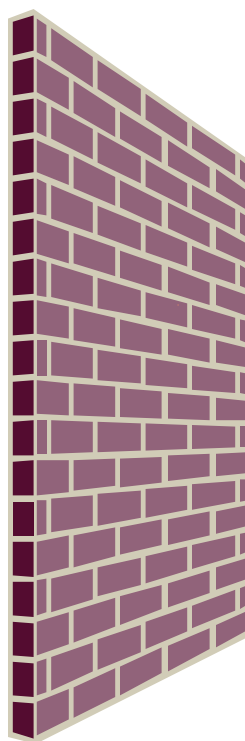being misunderstood
or misused?

Knowledge Seeker

Knowledge Source

Often, knowledge seekers and sources are trying to preserve or enhance their public images by their actions

Perception

How do I make sure I don't look foolish by asking for help?

How do I ensure that I am recognized for helping others?

Knowledge Seeker

Knowledge Source

Supporting communities of practice can help overcome barriers that separate knowledge seekers and knowledge sources

Community

Knowledge Seeker

Knowledge Source

Of Practice

An engineer has a problem but doesn't know who can help

A architect has a novel solution but doesn't know who might benefit
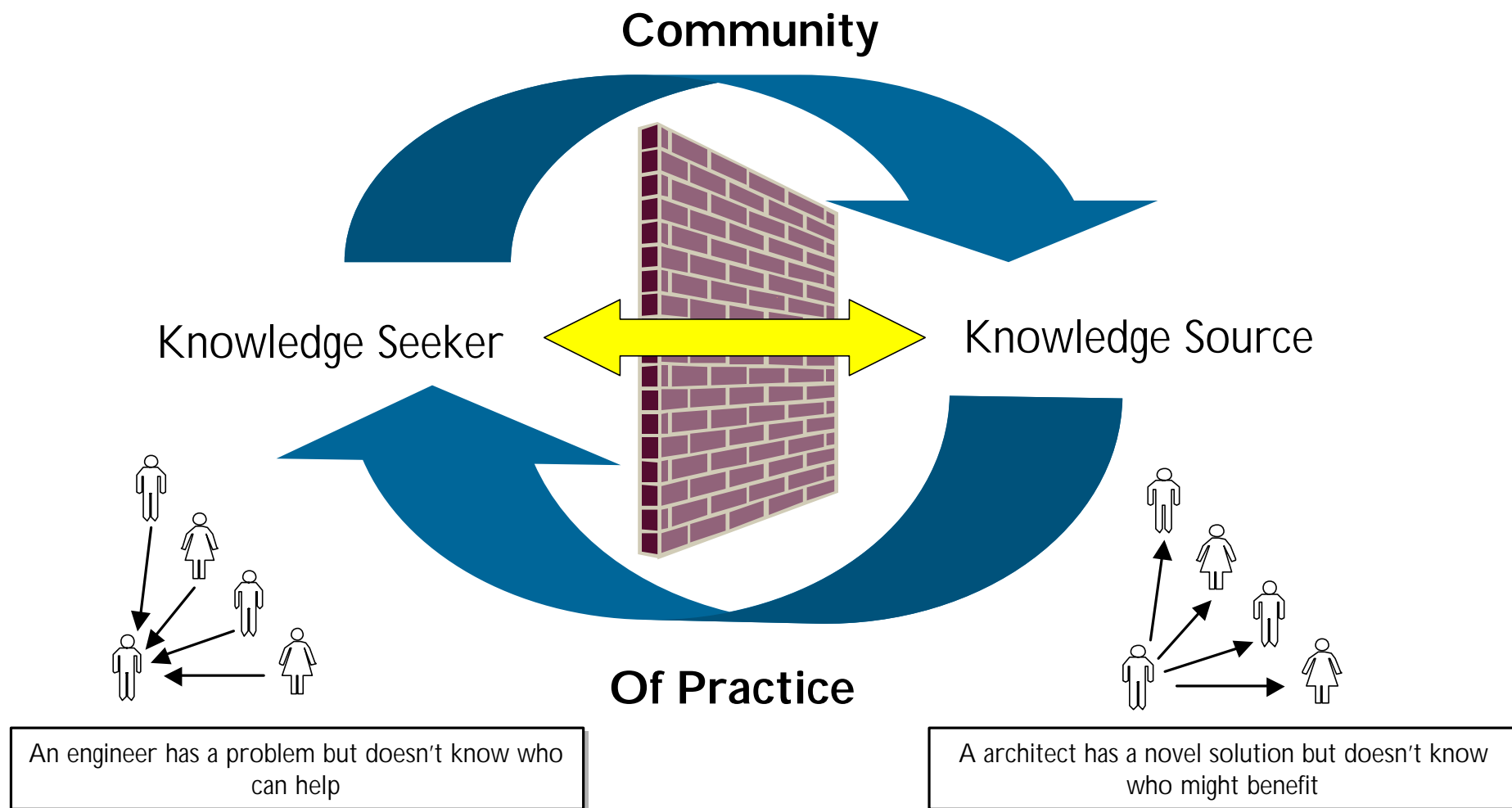
What is a community of practice and how does it differ from traditional organizational structures?

	What is its purpose?	Who Belongs to it?	What holds it together?	How long does it last?
Community	Build and exchange knowledge	Members are usually self-selected or join voluntarily	Passion and commitment around interest or practice	As long as there is an interest and passion
Department	Deliver a specific product or service	Often automatic or hired into	Common goals and job requirements	Until the next reorganization
Project Team	To accomplish a specific task	Determined by management assignment	Project milestones	Disperses when the project is complete
Committee	To consider, investigate or report on a matter that arises	Delegated or self-nominated	Sense of common purpose or goal	Stays in place until decisions are made

Communities of practice make it easier for knowledge seekers and sources to find each other

Awareness

Community

Knowledge
Seeker

Knowledge
Source

Of Practice

Community Activities

- Provide a central place where individuals new to the organization or discipline can quickly find others

- Conduct events and training course designed to bring people together and make them aware of individual and collective experience

- Maintain directory of community participants, key skills and interests

- Manage repositories of documents that can make knowledge visible throughout the community

Communities can better leverage and channel the limited discretionary time of its members

Community Activities

Access

Community

Knowledge Seeker ⇔ Knowledge Source

Of Practice

- Conduct activities where individuals can get to know the mutual needs and interests of others

- Provide a common place where individuals can post frequently-used documents and answers to questions to avoid continuous interruption

- Provide subject matter experts with resources (e.g. time, funding) to transfer knowledge on a one-to-many (vs. one-to-one) basis

Communities can set up both formal processes and informal norms that can help transform knowledge into action

Application

Community

Knowledge Seeker ⇔ **Knowledge Source**

Of Practice

Community Activities
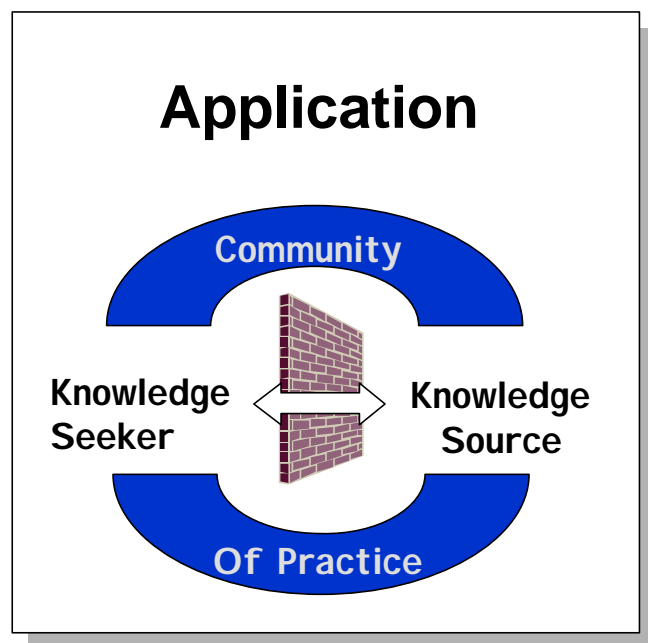
- Evaluate submissions to a repository to ensure that explicit knowledge base is current and contains relevant material for practitioners

- Provide training and information sessions that make knowledge "come to life"

- Facilitate the face-to-face connections that is necessary to communicate subtleties and nuances of contextual knowledge

- Determine and enact sanctions for individuals who misappropriate/misuse community knowledge

Communities can create an environment in which people are recognized for knowledge sharing and reuse

Community Activities

Perception

Community

Knowledge Seeker

Knowledge Source

Of Practice
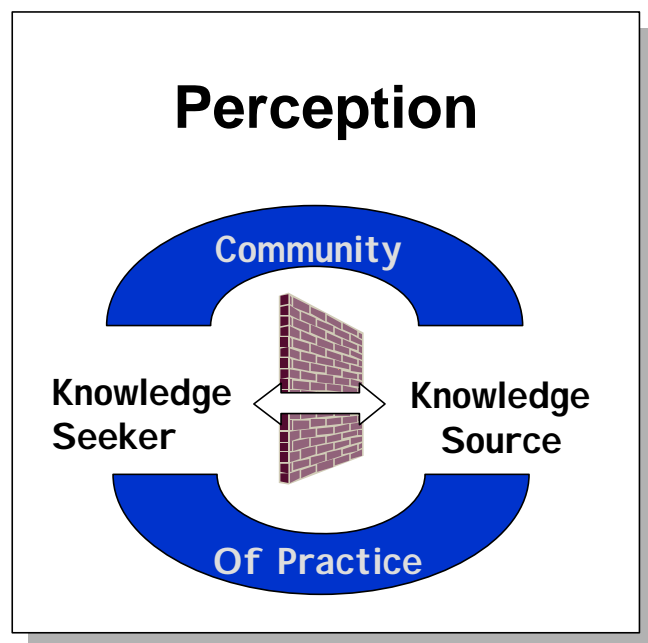
- Foster an environment where practitioners feel comfortable to test ideas without fear of ridicule or misappropriation

- Use communication and recognition vehicles to increase visibility of member contributions and reuse

Communities of practice help build social capital leading to an increased ability to manage knowledge

What is Social Capital?

Connections

Relations

Shared Context
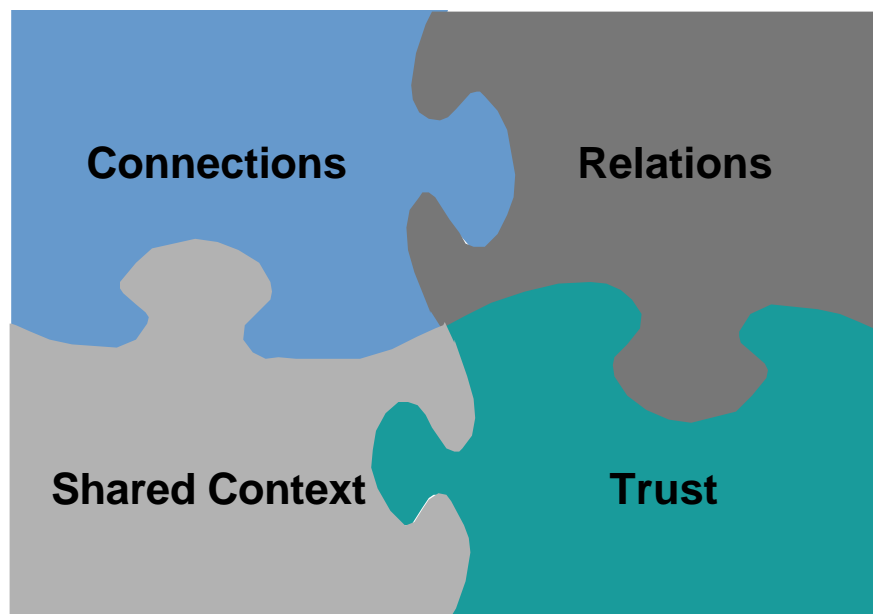
Trust

"Social capital consists of the stock of active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviors that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible."

Don Cohen & Larry Prusak – In Good Company

Time and space are two key ingredients in building successful communities and creating social capital

Time
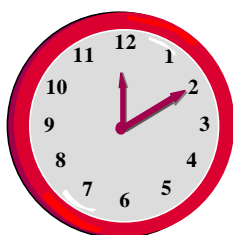
Space

- Organize events

- Review and manage content

- Teach and mentor new employees

- Participate in community activities

- Take part in discussion threads

- Either physical or virtual

- Common location to find content and make connections

- Can be provided by the formal organization but maintained by the community

- Well known to everyone

Technology can help keep knowledge-sharing conversations going beyond face-to-face encounters

- Audio/Video Conferencing
- Web Casting
- Remote Screen Sharing
- Secure Data Conferencing

Same Time

Different Place

- E-mail
- Voice Messaging
- Fax Sharing
- Intranet

Different Time

Different Place

Collaborative Environments

- White Boards
- Flip Charts
- Computer Projectors
- Decision Support Tools
- Video

Same Time

Same Place

Different Time

Same Place

- Workstations
- Bulletin Boards
- Kiosks
- Team Rooms

Supporting community roles is also important to ensuring successful knowledge sharing
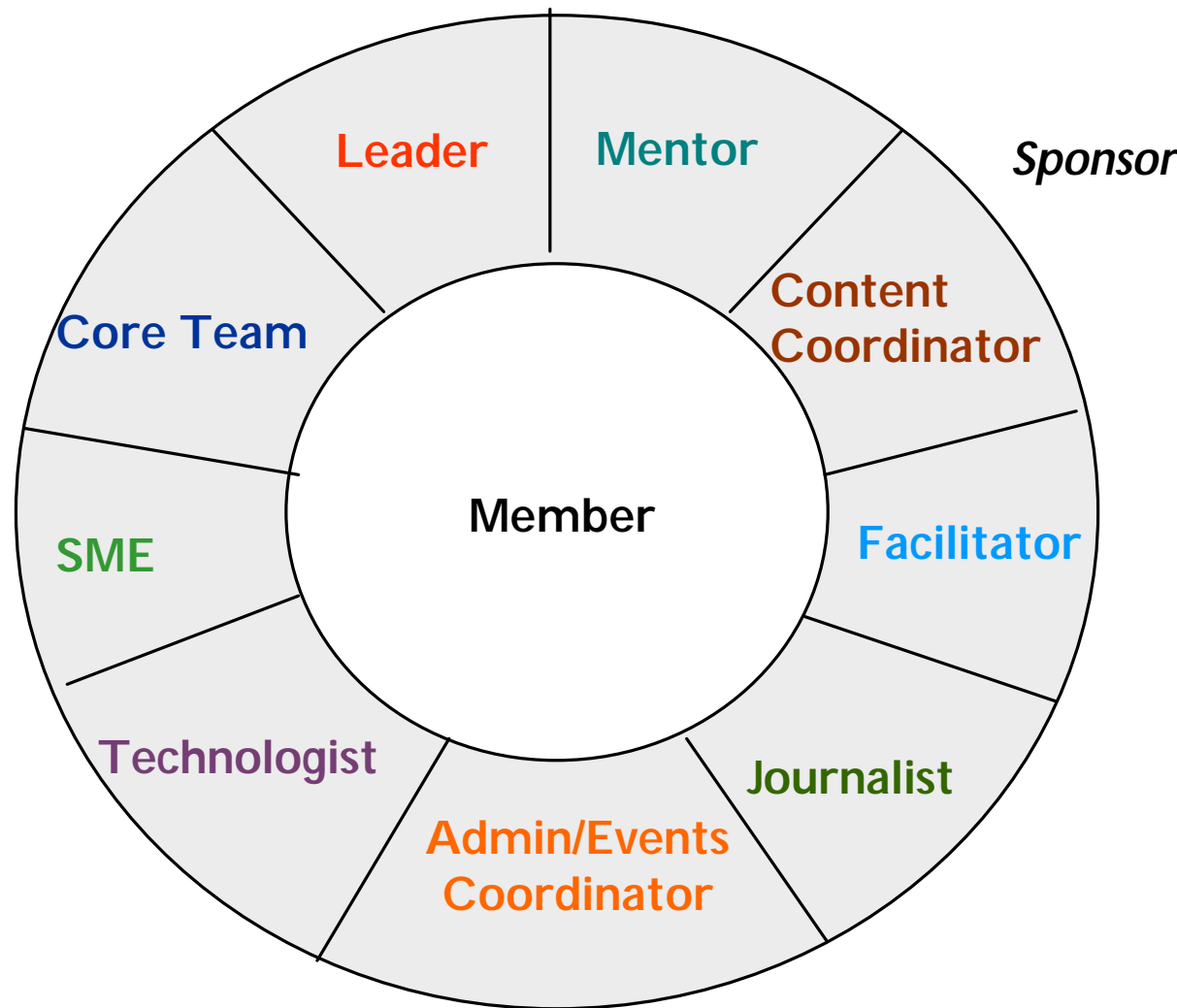
Senior management support is needed to help manage the 'white space" between the formal and informal organization

The Role of the Senior Sponsor

- Secure funding to enable the community to function

- Recognize and publicize community contribution

- Motivate and excite individuals to participate in community activities

- "Manage" the borders between communities

- Provide time for community members to collaborate

Unlike teams (where individuals are selected) communities need to be actively marketed to attract members and participation

Methods for marketing a community

- Existing orientation and training courses

- Intranet sites

- Posters and flyers

- E-Mail distribution lists

- Company newsletters

- Senior practitioners with connections throughout the organization

Community efforts need to recognize and leverage the use of informal knowledge brokers and boundary spanners

Who do you go to resolve problems (defined from Phase 1)?
Who do you go to for advice/expertise?
Who do you go to for innovative ideas and solutions?

Network Analysis

- Understand internal & external knowledge flows
- Identify key knowledge resources
- Identify important structural features

Isolate

Individual, group or dept. with limited or no participation in the network

Boundary spanner

Individual with multiple connections across organizational boundaries

Broker

Individual who serves as a nexus of many-to-many connections

Gate-keeper

Single point-of-contact through which all contact with a group, dept. or subnetwork must pass

![iko - Institute for Knowledge-Based Organizations]

Understanding the investments made in your community will help drive toward results
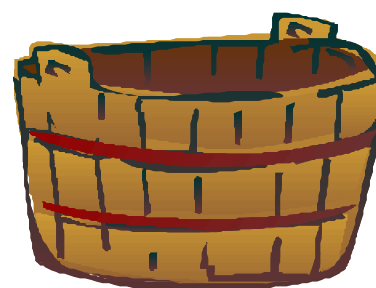
Roles

Activities

Technology

Content

These results can accumulate from a wide range of benefits produced by communities

- **Increased or improved levels of:**
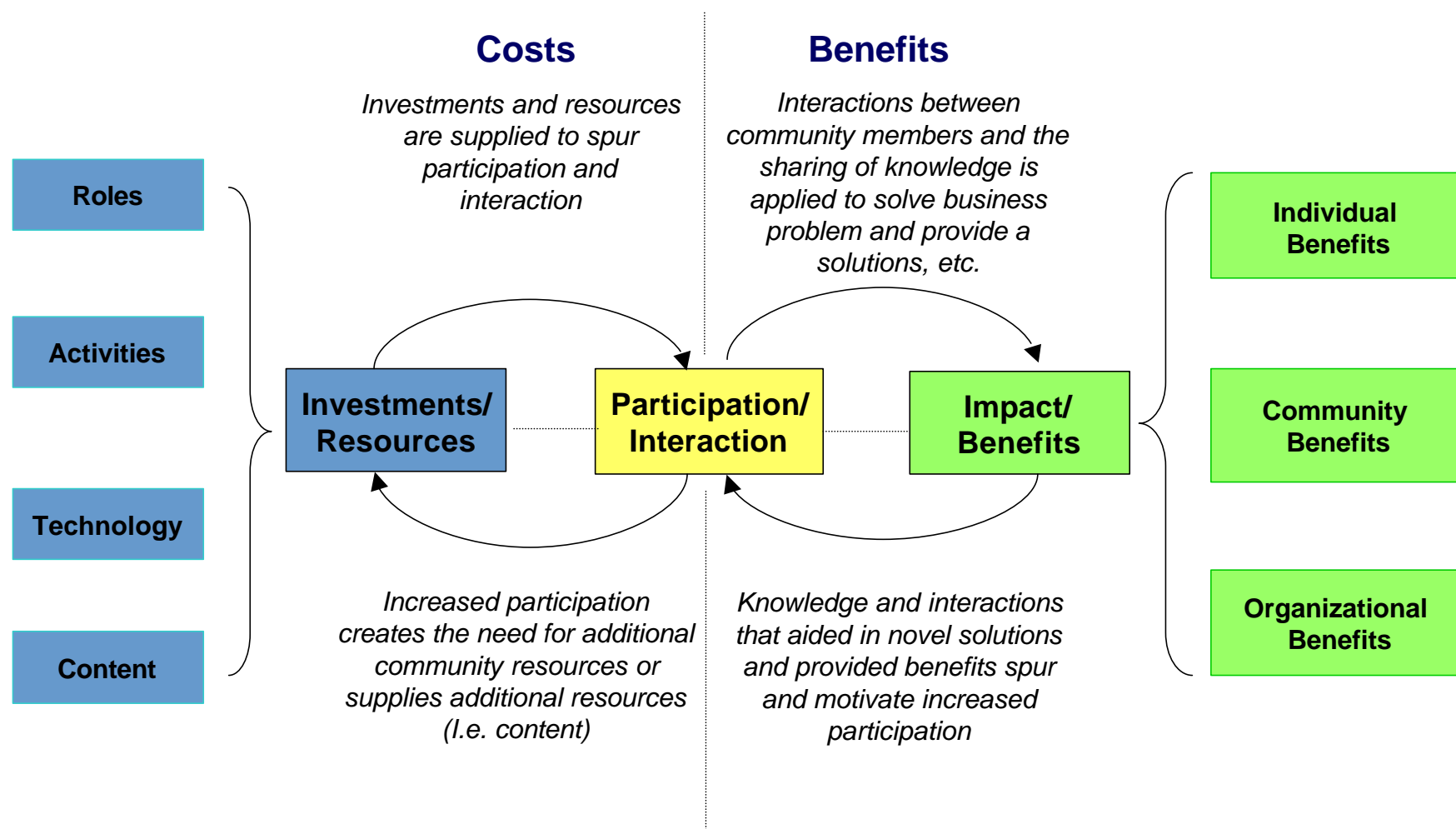
  - Trust
  - Collaboration
  - Professional reputation/identity
  - Job satisfaction
  - Empowerment
  - Learning/development
  - Idea creation
  - Identification/access to experts & knowledge
  - Quality of advice
  - Problem solving ability
  - Coordination/synergy
  - Customer loyalty/stickiness,
  - Customer satisfaction
  - Partnering success
  - Customer responsiveness

  - Innovation
  - Productivity or time savings
  - Project success
  - Authority and reputation with customers and partners
  - Ability to foresee emerging market, product, technology, capabilities and opportunities
  - Employee retention
  - Supplier relationships
  - New biz development
  - Risk management
  - Ability to execute corporate strategy
  - Higher sales per customer
  - New revenue from new biz/market or new product/service
  - New customers

- **Reduced or improved levels of:**

  - Customer turnover
  - Learning curve
  - Time-to-market

  - Customer service/support/acquisition costs
  - Supplier relationship costs
  - Cost of training

IKM (2000); Wenger E. (1998); Lesser, Fontaine & Slusher (2000); Preece, J. (2000); Kim, A.J. (2000); Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002)

To maximize results, community investments need to be matched with intended benefits

Costs

Investments and resources are supplied to spur participation and interaction

Benefits

Interactions between community members and the sharing of knowledge is applied to solve business problem and provide a solutions, etc.

Roles

Activities

Technology

Content

Investments/ Resources

Participation/ Interaction

Impact/ Benefits

Individual Benefits

Community Benefits

Organizational Benefits

Increased participation creates the need for additional community resources or supplies additional resources (I.e. content)

Knowledge and interactions that aided in novel solutions and provided benefits spur and motivate increased participation

Seven ways to make your community of practice successful

1. Obtain senior leadership support and "air cover"

2. Provide time and space to allow for participation in community activities

3. Identify and leverage existing "knowledge nodes" to draw others into the community and make connections between community members

4. Provide supporting roles and responsibilities as needed

5. Keep the conversation going beyond face-to-face encounters

6. Market the community to attract and revitalize membership

7. Measure the impact of community engagement